

The Hunt for Prairie Fisheries

By Ron Wilson



The conversation is fishing and Nick Simonson is off like a hot fish, with yards of monofilament in tow. His words are supercharged, taking the listener through the basics of smallmouth bass fishing before jumping from water to water, always mindful, however, not to reveal the whereabouts of his sweetest spots.

"It's nice to do your own legwork because when things do pan out, it's a lot more rewarding that way," said Simonson of Valley City. "It's not like the places that I fish are

secrets. They're all listed right there on the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's website (or in this magazine).

Some of the waters out there that get so little attention are winners, some real gems."

Simonson is an attorney, but does some outdoor writing on the side. "There are a few lakes that I don't make mention of in my newspaper columns," he said. There are some instances, Simonson understands, when it doesn't pay to fish and tell.

The idea isn't to waste time wringing your hands over the locations of Simonson's honey holes, but to find your own. There are dozens and dozens of rivers, streams, lakes, reservoirs and ponds that hold trout, pike, walleye,

bass, take your pick. Check our website (discovernd.com/gnf/), search this magazine, then spread a map across the kitchen table and plan an outing.

"To be fair, the farther east you go in the state, the more opportunities for different fish species and the number of water bodies goes up," said Greg Power, Department fisheries management and research supervisor. "Even so, you still have places in western North Dakota like Odland Dam north of Beach that's been around for nearly 80 years, but still occasionally puts out some dandy perch."

Gain Some, Lose Some

Some waters added to the Department's list of fisheries, thanks to unprecedented wet conditions in the 1990s, have been removed as they have become too shallow. Yet, losing some waters is not necessarily such a bad

North Dakota's prairie fisheries hold a variety of fish species, including rainbow trout.



CHRIS GRONDAHL



Nick Simonson with a Sheyenne River walleye.

thing because it's time for many of them to be rejuvenated.

The reason these waters were so good after flooding was because vegetation left high and dry for years created wonderful spawning and rearing habitat. The inundated vegetation also provided a nutrient boost to the fishery, and invertebrates followed, offering fish plenty to eat. "For fish and ducks on the prairie, it's often feast or famine," Power said of the up and down nature of prairie waters. "These prairie lakes need to have that drying out to jumpstart their productivity. When we get some big rains, the fish will be back."

Northern pike, especially, took advantage of the newly-flooded waters or recharged older lakes, and their populations exploded. Things, however, are swinging the other way now. "People need to get after the pike while there are pike in some of these waters," Power said. "We don't know what it's going to be like next year, let alone five years from now."

The list of North Dakota fisheries is still long. There are nearly 300 public fisheries out there, with some receiving little attention from anglers. "While it's no secret, good fishing opportunities welcome anglers in many corners of the state," Power said. "Like the already mentioned Odland Dam near the Montana border; Northgate Dam (Burke County), which is a good spot for walleye and trout that is located near the Canadian border; or travel south near the South Dakota border and fish Froelich Dam (Sioux County) where a mix of pike, walleye, crappie and perch await the angler."

Nick Simonson is firm in his stance about releasing smallmouth bass caught from the Sheyenne River.

Fish Hard

From about April 15 to early October, Simonson is fishing North Dakota's open waters six days a week. After work, weekends, whenever, he's jumping around from little lake to little lake in Barnes County, or fishing the Sheyenne River. "I'm not seeing any competition from other anglers as I go from lake to lake," he said. "You get this sense of belonging because you have many of the places to yourself."

When you learn of Simonson's devotion to the Sheyenne River – another unique fishery that is often overlooked – it's a wonder he ever strays from moving water. "I can't tell you how much fun I've had over the last five years and how much fishing the Sheyenne has enriched my life," he said. "When you fish the river, everything is a little more compact and readable, and you can take this information and use it somewhere else."

The species Simonson reels from the river run the gamut – rock bass, smallmouth bass, white bass, walleye, with a crappie or two thrown in. There are days – not every day, mind you – where an angler can catch fish after fish. And if the angler is mindful, he learns about the influence of feeder creeks and break lines for walleye and the habitat bass prefer.

"There is no question that I prefer to fish the river," he said. "I'm so content about what we have right out our backdoor, but sometimes it makes my fishing buddies sick. There are times they'd like to fish somewhere else."

Catch-and-Release

The Sheyenne, it seems, wins out most often when deciding where to go. Simonson and his cohorts have even named some fish, familiar faces that have ended up in their nets more than once. There's this smallmouth bass they call "1975" because she's 19.75

inches long. "We can tell that fish by her length and her eyes," he said. "The summer of 2003 we caught her six times. The thing about smallmouth is that you'll always find them in the same spot ... they love their territory."

Six times because she didn't end up as shore lunch. When it comes to smallmouth, Simonson practices catch-and-release. "If 20 boats ended up on the river one day and kept the bass they caught, they could affect a stretch. Smallmouth are a renewable resource."

During the 1990s, the Game and Fish Department stocked a lot of smallmouth bass around the state, Power said. Biologists report some natural reproduction from those stockings, with Spiritwood Lake in Stutsman County producing the best numbers and size of fish. In 2003, the state record smallmouth, a 5-pound, 15-ounce fish, was caught from Spiritwood.

"There are a scattering of smallmouth bass fisheries in all corners of the state that hold some pretty good fish," Power said. "We promote catch-and-release fishing for bass, especially smallies, because you can knock down their populations pretty quickly."

Fishing for Fisheries

Whatever the angler is into – from still water to moving water from bass to walleye – he or she can find it in North Dakota. "The beauty of these smaller rivers and lakes is the variety in size and fish species they hold," Simonson said. "With a little leg work and the willingness to try something new, you just never know what you're going to find."

Or where you're going to find it.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

